

New report details unfinished business

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Last week, the US Surgeon General released its latest report on smoking and health – The Health Consequences of Smoking: Fifty Years of Progress.

The study details considerable gains made by our country in reducing tobacco's deadly toll since the first Surgeon General's report on smoking in 1964, as well as the substantial unfinished work that lies ahead if we're to end the century-long public health catastrophe caused by cigarette smoking.

The Surgeon General warns that "the burden of smoking-attributable disease and premature death and its high costs to the nation will continue for decades unless smoking prevalence is reduced more rapidly than the current trajectory." The report concludes that millions of deaths could be averted over the coming century if we simply make "tobacco control a highest priority in our overall public health commitment and strategy."

The report highlights a "trifecta" of effective, science-based tobacco control measures that have been responsible for the dramatic reduction of tobacco use since 1964: increasing excise cigarette taxes and the overall price of cigarettes, passing workplace smoke-free laws, and implementing comprehensive tobacco prevention and cessation programs, such as tobacco quit lines and hard-hitting media campaigns and outreach.

In Nevada, these state and local measures have helped reduce both adult and youth smoking rates over the past two decades. Nevertheless, over 1 in 5 adult Nevadans currently smoke and Nevada ranks dead last among US states in terms of the percentage of adults who report being exposed to secondhand smoke in their home or workplace.

A large part of the explanation of stalled progress on cigarette smoking and smoking-attributable disease in Nevada lies in the failure of lawmakers to raise cigarette taxes in more than a decade – the current excise tax has remained at 80 cents per pack since 2003 – and their failure to extend comprehensive smoke-free indoor workplace protections to 100 percent of Nevada workers.

Raising cigarette taxes, to take one example, is the single most effective way to reduce cigarette use among youth smokers most sensitive to price. Likewise, most of the 170,000 Nevadans employed in the hospitality industry are exposed to secondhand smoke simply by showing up to work each day.

Stalled progress on smoking rates in Nevada is also a product of the abject failure of policymakers to fully fund comprehensive statewide tobacco control programs at levels recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The State of Nevada currently spends less than one penny of every dollar received through tobacco taxes and tobacco settlement dollars on solid, evidenced-based prevention and cessation strategies despite the fact that close to 3 billion dollars is billed each year for hospital care to treat tobacco-related illnesses in Nevada.

The latest Surgeon General's report provides an opportunity take stock of the progress made in reducing tobacco's toll. Let's now use the occasion of these findings to finally end the epidemic of disease and death caused by tobacco in Nevada.

The report can be found at http://www.cdc.gov/TOBACCO/data_statistics/sgr/index.htm.

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